

## Community of Democracies Ministerial Session

Lisbon July 2009

Remarks by Paul Graham on Democratic Governance and Intercultural Dialogue.

I would like to thank our Portuguese hosts for inviting us to Lisbon and for providing us with such a marvelous environment in which to meet as the Community of Democracies. It is a privilege to be here and to have a further opportunity to continue a conversation that was initiated in Warsaw nine years ago.

There are many formal platforms in which we meet globally as citizens and nations. But here we have an opportunity as close friends and relatives to retire to a back room of the house to talk about those things which concern and puzzle us.

We know that it is the human condition that we are different. We are creatures of our families, our neighbourhoods, our education, our class, geography, language, religion, political interests, heritage and culture. Our differences are profound. We can be strangers even to our children; thus when we confront or contact one another across more fundamental boundaries, the results are often incendiary.

However, at our best we know that under the skin we are all the same. This slow and sure enlightenment, driven in part by theological reflection, formal dialogue, and practical experience, has been confirmed by science. A thin strand of DNA unites us all despite the separate migrations which spread us throughout the globe and determined the lives that our forefathers would lead.

It is therefore unsurprising that humanity at its best expresses not our differences but our unity. That unity is codified after a great conflagration, as often happens after the failure of war, when in 1948 we declared a "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family".

From this 60 year old statement to the most recent adoption by the African Union of a charter on democracy, elections and governance this fundamental understanding of our common humanity has included an understanding of our right to take part in our own government and that it should express the people's will.

We here are the proof that the assertion of "the universal values and principles of democracy" is not an unrealistic charade obscuring some inherent obstacles to its public expression.

We are not therefore ultimately involved here in discussions about 'should' and 'can'. Our hosts answered the question, "should Portugal choose democracy" 35 years ago. The fact that we are now gathering in Lisbon answers the question "Can Portugal be a democracy".

The majority of intend in my country made their choice many years ago and achieved it in 1994 enshrining their diversity and unity 1, their 1996 constitution, saying for instance, “national legislation must

- a. promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of
  - i. all official languages;
  - ii. the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
  - iii. sign language ; and
- b. promote and ensure respect for
  - i. all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and
  - ii. Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa. “

In this room are citizens, some in government service and others representing voluntary associations of various types who are from poor countries, from majority Muslim countries, from every latitude and longitude who have answered these two questions in the affirmative. We should indeed claim the rights which have been declared and we can, despite our apparent differences and the serious exigencies of the decades, be democracies.

There are however four conversations that we may want to engage in here in this back room amongst ourselves, citizens in democracies who have managed, with effort and despite difficulties, to see below the differences in our own countries and with slightly more effort between our countries.

We must talk about how to improve the quality of democracy in our own countries. How can we include the marginalized, women, the poor, new immigrants so that they feel that they count and that they are valued? How do we provide for all our citizens so that they may live dignified and good lives, free from fear and deprivation? And how do we do this in a time of limited resources? How can people use their political and civil rights to claim their economic, social and cultural rights?

We can also talk about how we assist those countries and their citizens when they struggle to stay on the path of democracy which they have chosen. The members of the community have responded strongly to the unconstitutional changes in government in places like Honduras and Madagascar. But there are less visible and sometimes more damaging failures to live up to the principles we have chosen as right and proper. The Community has the means of diagnosis, but has not yet developed the systems of treatment. How do we not desert the citizens of those countries who find their lives blighted by the quests for power of particular elites?

Thirdly we can choose to talk about ways in which we can create an environment which protects and defends those people who do not have the freedoms we consider a natural part of life ‘ freedom of association, of expression, of assembly, of life, of participation in governments which represent the common will. And how will we enable them to achieve those rights?

These are not easy conversations. There will be differences of approach, of tactics and techniques, of the balancing of interests. There is a large family of people promoting and supporting democracy, from the UN family, regional bodies and treaty frameworks, donor agencies, civil society networks, and academic institutions and journals. Let us here in the Community of Democracies have these conversations, understanding that we have created a privileged place in which all who enter share a common set of values and aspirations.

The fourth conversation that we could have is about whether and to what degree we can construct a world in which the values we believe are universal can be expressed. To what extent can we create reliable institutions which are transparent, accountable, equally accessible to all, and consistent? How can we do this in a world of continuing inequality?

None of these conversations is unique to the Community of Democracies. But unless they are taken seriously here in this forum created especially for them, we will not be taken seriously. Instead they will be conducted elsewhere, in spaces where our differences as peoples and countries are magnified and sometimes manipulated. Let us therefore take the opportunity that has been created here, in a place where, as we said in Warsaw and reminded ourselves in Seoul, Santiago, and Bamako we will “work together to promote and strengthen democracy... We will cooperate to consolidate and strengthen democratic institutions... Our goal is to support adherence to common democratic values and standards.”

Here we have an inter-cultural dialogue, not about whether we can and want to be democrats but about how we will live as democrats in a complex world, pressed upon by economic gloom, poverty and inequality, and potential climate catastrophe. It is our privilege to do this on behalf of all those whom we represent, who voted for us, employed us or founded our organizations, and who expect us to do our best.